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EUR/NCE FOR ALEX TRATENSEK, INR/EUC FOR ADRIAN HARMATA AND DAVID ARMITAGE

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SUBJECT: CZECHS TO APPOINT FORMER MINISTER OF AGRICULTURE AS THEIR NEW EU AMBASSADOR (C-RE7-01285)

REF: SECSTATE 124973

¶1. (SBU) The former Czech Agriculture Minister, Milena Vicenova, will become the new Czech Ambassador to the European Union. She will replace Jan Kohout, who was formally recalled by the President on September 19. Vicena is likely to take up the post before the end of the year. The Embassy, particularly the Foreign Agriculture Service, has had an excellent, long-standing working relationship with Minister Vicenova. Of note, the U.S. Department of Agriculture funded her participation in the Cochran Fellowship program in 1999. While she is multilingual, known as an intelligent interlocutor, and strong on agriculture issues, she appears to be a relative novice with respect to EU bureaucracy, which could hamper Czech preparations for its EU Presidency beginning in January 2009.

Priorities - Known for Anti-Corruption

¶2. (U) After more than ten years working in various sections within the Agriculture Ministry, Vicenova was briefly elevated to Agriculture Minister between September 2006 and January 2007. During her tenure, she was known for her efforts to address corruption, removing several high-ranking officials. Officially, her ministry's top two priorities were preparing for the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) "health check" in 2008 and the Czech EU presidency commencing in January 2009.

Agriculture Reform and Biotechnology

¶3. (U) On agricultural matters, Vicenova was known to support agricultural reforms that led toward market liberalization. As well, she viewed biotechnology positively, although she was always quick to point out that the Czech Republic was bound by the EU legislation on genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Nonetheless, the Czech Republic is among the liberal states within the EU that supports a science-based approach.

An Unknown on EU Matters

¶4. (SBU) For the last several months, prior to this appointment, Vicenova has been with the National Education Fund as a project manager and also advising the Ministry of Regional Development on EU funding. While Dr. Vicenova has very strong credentials in the area of agriculture, since she is a former veterinarian with many years experience within the Agriculture Ministry, her knowledge and experience working on EU matters appears relatively limited. In addition to her focus on the EU during her brief tenure as Minister, and her current work on EU funding, Vicenova served as MinAg Director of EU Relations in 2003.

Comment: ODS wants their own Ambassador

15. (SBU) Kohout's tenure in Brussels was due to end in early 2008. The government faced the choice of extending him through the 2009 EU Presidency, or replacing him now (the MFA is shifting many senior staff in the summer and fall of 2007, and does not plan to make any significant personnel rotations next year so that all staff are familiar with their responsibilities before the Presidency begins). While Kohout has a reputation here as having served well in Brussels, he is also known as a sympathizer of the opposition Social Democrats (CSSD), and in fact was briefly considered as a possible CSSD nominee as Prime Minister. The ruling ODS (out of government for eight years prior to the 2006 election) has made no secret of its desire to see its own people in key positions. The choice of Vicenova has generated little grumbling here, aside from the predictable complaints from CSSD. Vicenova is not a member of ODS or any political party. She, like several other independents who served briefly in last year's minority ODS government, is seen as a competent and dedicated public servant. She can be expected to faithfully carry out instructions from Prague.

GRABER